DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 224 001 CS 006 930

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TITLE Basic Skill Emphasis: Its Effect on Independent Reading Development.
PUB DATE Nov 82
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Regional Conference of the International Reading Association (8th, Biloxi, MS, November 4-6, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basic Skills; Elementary Education; Instructional Materials; Middle Schools; *Reading Attitudes; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Interests; *Reading Material Selection; *Reading Research; Student Attitudes; Student Needs; Student Teacher Relationship; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

One hundred forty-seven students enrolled in a developmental reading program responded to a questionnaire designed to ascertain the reading attitudes and interests of middle school students. It was hypothesized that by overemphasizing basic skills instruction, schools may not be taking the necessary steps to help students develop the ability and desire to read and learn independently. Specifically the questions were designed to learn (1) what percentage of students felt the reading materials were of practical value to them, (2) what percentage found the materials of interest, (3) students' reading interests, and (4) students' perceptions of teacher choices of material for them. The results indicated that 71% felt that the materials helped them in other school subjects, but only half felt the materials helped them outside of school. Forty percent liked the reading materials; 60% did not. Sports was the subject of greatest interest, followed by animals, mystery, comics and humorous stories, and science fiction. Only half felt that teachers would select books to match their reading interests. The results seemed to indicate a lack of communication between students and teachers in the reading material selection process, and suggested a need for teachers and students to discuss the value of all activities in reading class. (The questionnaire used in the study is appended.) (HTH)

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Basic Skill Emphasis: Its Effect On Independent Reading Development

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Paper presented at the Eighth Southeastern Regional Conference of the International Reading Association, Biloxi, Mississippi, November, 1982

CS006930

Basic Skill Emphasis: Its Effect on
Independent Reading Development

A central issue in the reading field is the dilemma of bridging the gap between basic skill mastery and the development of life-long reading habits. More specifically, the teacher of reading must ask "How can I equip my students with the basic reading skills to help insure a literate society and at the same time instill the ability and desire to read and learn independently?

The primary aim of this paper is to report the results of a status study on reading attitudes and interests of middle school students. Throughout the nation, schools place major emphasis on basic skill mastery in preparation for state mandated competency tests. Nevertheless, the development of independent reading habits is an expressed goal of all reading programs. But, as is widely known, the growth of independent reading cannot be left to chance. Many times it takes a back seat to the nationwide wave of basic skill instruction. By overemphasizing basic skill instruction, schools may not be taking the necessary steps to help students develop the ability and desire to read and learn independently. Allington (1977) addresses this concern by stating "In fact, when reading takes a back seat to skills instruction, one has to ask the age old question about the cart and the horse." This basic skill emphasis is, and rightly so, a national concern as is readily seen in the number of

legislative mandates, competency tests at various grade levels, pressure on teachers to insure pupils "pass" such tests, inordinate number of inservice activities related to basic skills, and the plethora of new materials to help students learn these mandated skills.

At the same time, it is important and necessary to examine the independent or recreational reading habits of students. Basic skill mastery does not automatically equate with increased recreational reading ability. The importance of mastering basic skills loses its powerfulness if students cannot or will not read to learn on their own.

The phases of learning to read and reading to learn should be viewed as overlapping in nature, not separate entities. Speaking to this issue, Jackson (1970) stated:

> In truth, we do not learn how to read and then put the ability to use. We do both at once. Though we may wish to separate our thoughts about these two phenomena and treat them as distinguishable stages of a single process, the two in actuality are inextricably intertwined (p. 85).

Status Study

A status study of reading attitudes and interests of middle school students (grades 5, 6, 7) was conducted to gain insights into the dilemma between basic skill mastery and recreational reading ability. One hundred forty-seven students in a rural southeastern county enrolled in a developmental reading program responded to the reading questionnaire. This questionnaire was designed to assess students attitudes and interests to materials used in reading class and student

perceptions regarding the applicability and practicality of reading materials to aid in fostering independent reading habits.

Results

Information from the questionnaire were designed to answer four main questions. The questions and summary of results are listed below.

1. What percentage of the students felt the reading materials were of practical value to them?

   Findings:

   71 percent felt the materials used in reading class helped in other school subjects, 29 percent did not.

   52 percent felt that working with the reading materials in school helped them outside of school, 48 percent did not.

2. What percentage of the students found the materials used in their reading class of interest?

   Findings:

   40 percent of the students liked the reading materials used in class, 60 percent did not.

3. What are students' interests?

   Findings:

Sports	33 percent
Animals	20 percent
Mystery	12 percent
Comics and Humorous Stories	7 percent

Science Fiction

TV

Movie Stars — Less than 5 percent for each topic

Careers

Adventures

4. What are students' perceptions of teacher choices of materials for them?

Findings:

30 percent felt teachers would choose school work or ditto sheets to read

16 percent responded that they didn't know what teachers would select for them

54 percent felt teachers would select books to match their interests

Discussion

The primary objective of the study was to ascertain the students' viewpoints of reading materials used in their classes. Viewing these results from the standpoint of a comprehensive reading program, one has to question the results. The profile of responses seems to indicate a lack of balance needed to foster lifelong reading habits. The authors feel a common thread runs through the student responses. This thread appears to be lack of communication between teachers and students. In many cases, teachers did not seem to know what students were interested in reading. And many students don't seem to know or don't understand why they use the materials in the

reading class.

This one reason of lack of communication might explain many of the findings. Almost 50 percent of the students felt their reading material did not help them learn outside of school. This connection between class materials and their usefulness in learning outside of school must be continually explained and encouraged by teachers. Due to the open nature of the reading questionnaire, it was possible to glean other commonalities in the student responses. Students seemed to like educational games but did not view them as helping them to learn. Again, this fact must be continually communicated to students. Likewise, many students felt reading itself was fine but the "other stuff" of dittos and workbooks were "work". Student responses seemed to indicate a dichotomy existed between recreational reading and skills work and dittos. Speaking directly to this point, Spiegel (1981) stressed that by emphasizing reading assignments over recreational reading, children will view reading as a series of assignments. Apparently, such was the case in this study for at least a third of the students.

Also, 60 percent of the students did not like the materials in their class. Interviews with teachers indicated students were not involved in material selection and purchase. In order for a reading class to be a success, interesting and meaningful materials must be used with students. If not the reading class can intensify rather than diminish reading problems.

Last, the perceptions students hold regarding teacher selection

of books for them were surprising. Over 30 percent of the students felt teachers would select "school work" or dittos on skills instead of story books. Another 16 percent had no idea what teachers would select for them. This seems to indicate a lack of communication between teachers and students regarding student interests. Furthermore, Oliver (1973) suggested that often children discover the values of teachers concerning reading by what teachers select for them to read. It is reasonable to ask the question "Can we criticize students for feeling that teachers place a high value on reading dittos and thus reading is completing such activities?"

Middle schools, in particular, are caught in the dilemma of assuring students know and apply basic reading skills. At the same time reading programs must provide experiences that insure students can learn with a variety of materials and work purposes in the content areas and provide experiences in recreational reading to expand learning horizons and reading interests.

However, in practice, the learning of basic skills along with the basal reading program many times constitutes the total reading program. While this emphasis may lead to mastery of some or all basic skills, it eliminates the two vital areas of independent reading and content reading. Unfortunately, this narrow viewpoint of a total reading program inhibits the development of broad reading on the part of children. Indeed, the ultimate success or failure of a developmental reading program has to be judged on the degree to which students can apply their abilities and skills in varied reading situations.

Children must be given the opportunity to develop independent reading habits or else they simply will join the growing number of adults who can read but simply refuse to do so.

Jackson (1970) spoke directly to this point. His ingenious conclusion is best stated in his own words.

> "When school days are no more than memories the inhabitants of today's classrooms will turn to books (if they turn to them at all) not because someone tells them to do so nor because they will get good grades if they do, but because they find the experience personally rewarding. They will read not because they have to do so, but because they want to do so. Surely we must worry about whether what we do in school enhances or erodes the development of this desire." (p. 96)

Conclusion

The foregoing is not to suggest that school reading programs need not emphasize basic skill mastery. Basic reading skills are necessary but should not be viewed as ends in themselves. Their value lies only in the overall goal of increasing independent reading ability. With respect to interests and perceptions of practicality, the students, of course, are the best source. Immediate implications of this status study suggest that teachers determine the interest quality and practicality of materials used in their classes. Next, a careful balance be maintained between basic skill instruction and independent reading. Last, it is imperative that teachers and

students together communicate the value of all activities in a reading class to the promotion of independent learning both inside and outside of school. Most of all, the argument presented in the paper has asked that some concern be directed toward the quality of reading experiences offered to students in our classrooms.

Reading Questionnaire

Directions

Do not write your name anywhere on this. No one will know how you answered. This is not a test. There are no right or wrong answers. I want you to tell me what you think of your reading class and the things you read for this class.

Take all the time you need. Write just what you think.

1. If you could choose the books and magazines to use in your reading class, what would they be about?

2. Do you feel that the th ings you read in your reading class have helped you in your other subjects?

   How have they helped?

   If you feel that the things you read in your reading class have not helped you in your other subjects, why haven't they helped?

3. What do you like best about your reading class?

   What don't you like about your reading class?

4. Rate the reading materials used in your reading class.

   I like them: (circle one)

   1. not at all 2. a little 3. sometimes - half and half

   4. fairly well 5. very much

5. If your teacher got a book for you to read, what do you think it would be about?

6. Do you feel that working with the reading materials in school have helped you outside school?

   How have they helped?

   If you feel that working with the reading materials in school have not helped you outside of school, why haven't they helped?

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